HISTORY IN THE HOUSE

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CONGRESS IN PHILADELPHIA

For ten years in the early life of the federal republic, Philadelphia was home to Congress and the national government. The city served as a temporary capital of the United States from December 1790 until the fall of 1800. During these years Congress faced some of the most divisive issues in its history and became the principal forum for debate on the role of the federal government in foreign affairs and the domestic economy. As the largest and most sophisticated city in the United States, Philadelphia provided a lively setting for these critical years in the establishment of the new government. The city's rich and diverse life inevitably became a part of the business of the federal government.

Philadelphians, like residents in many parts of America, campaigned to make their city the permanent seat of government under the new Constitution. The proponents of a capital on the Potomac River won out, of course, but as part of the compromise surrounding the placement of the seat of government and Hamilton's plan for the assumption of state debts, Congress in 1790 agreed to locate the capital in Philadelphia for ten years while the federal city was built. As early as March 1789, Philadelphia had offered Congress a meeting place in a new wing of the State House (now known as Independence Hall). The original plans of 1740 included wings for city and county offices on either side of the State House. Not until 1785 did the Pennsylvania Assembly appropriate funds for the construction of a hall for the county on the southeast corner of Chestnut and Sixth Streets. Work began in 1788, and the building was finished by February 1789.

Following passage of the Residence Act in the summer of 1790, the Philadelphia County Commission furnished its new chambers in preparation for the arrival of Congress. Henceforth, the new county building was known as Congress Hall. At the opening of the third session of the First Congress on December 6, 1790, the House of Representatives convened in a chamber occupying almost the entire first floor of Congress Hall. This chamber was far simpler than the one designed by L'Enfant in New York City. Representatives sat at desks in three semi-circular rows facing a Speaker's chair without a canopy. Along the north side of the chamber ran a gallery entered from outside. The Senate met in a more elaborate chamber on the second floor.

With the increased number of representatives following the census of 1790, the House chamber proved too small. Pennsylvania's State Assembly, still hoping to keep the capital in Philadelphia, provided funds for a forty foot extension on the south side of the chamber. At the same time the Assembly ordered construction of a Senate gallery "calculated for the admission of the citizens" hitherto excluded from hearing the secret deliberations of that body. Behind Congress Hall lay a garden designed by Samuel Vaughan, a former merchant of London and friend of George Washington. Two doors at the rear of the House Chamber were often left open to allow Congressmen a retreat to the garden for conversation while debate continued on the floor.

As the long-time home to the Continental Congress and meeting place of the Federal Convention, Philadelphia was familiar to many Members of Congress. Others knew the city as the nation's leading center for commerce and the arts. Although Benjamin Franklin died the spring before Congress arrived, his spirit of curiosity and enlightenment was alive and well throughout the 1790s. The relocation

The State House buildings in Philadelphia as they appeared in 1796. Congress Hall stands on the right. The familiar steeple on Independence Hall (center) was razed in 1781 and rebuilt in 1828. Library of Congress.

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The intersection of Market and Second Streets in Philadelphia in 1799. When Congress met in Philadelphia during the 1790s, the city was the largest in the nation. Library of Congress.

of the federal government further enhanced the intellectual life of the city and made Philadelphia the center of social life in the new nation. During the 1790s the social activity surrounding the federal government reached an elaborate stage such as Washington, D.C., would not see until the late-nineteenth century.

For wealthy Philadelphians, the arrival of the government in 1790 provided a splendid opportunity to achieve new social prominence. William and Nancy Bingham, a wealthy couple who lived in London and Paris in the 1780s, emerged as the leading entertainers of government officials. Their palatial, some said ostentatious and unrepublican, house on Spruce Street was the site of many receptions for the president and prominent congressmen. William Bingham's influence grew when he entered the Senate in 1795 and served as president pro tempore. As long as Washington remained in office, he and his wife were the most important figures in federal society. The city rented Robert Morris' Market Street house for the use of the Washingtons, and the president personally supervised the furnishing of this imposing building that was the scene of his fortnightly levees. On a more modest scale, Dolley Payne Todd emerged as a popular hostess in the new capital. Following the death of her husband in 1793, she met the bachelor congressman, James Madison, and several months later, in September 1794, the two were married.

Like other sizable cities of the late eighteenth century, Philadelphia presented all the problems associated with a diverse population, rapid growth, and economic dislocation. To a misanthrope like William Cobbett, editor of the popular *Porcupine's Gazette*, the city was filled with "the swinish multitude." After a visit to Congress Hall, he claimed "the galleries are filled with a respectable group of idle oyster-men and lounging apprentices, superintending the proceedings of Government." More objective observers recognized the inevitable problems arising from 27,000 immigrants passing through the city during Congress' ten years in residence. Thirteen thousand of the immigrants, most of them from Ireland, remained in Philadelphia, helping to increase the city's population from 44,000 in 1790 to over 61,000 in 1800.

The most dangerous aspects of eighteenth-century urban life became unavoidable in 1793 when Philadelphia suffered a severe epidemic of yellow fever. Congress was out of session, but members of the executive branch, including Alexander Hamilton, contracted the disease. Washington and Jefferson retreated to the country as the fever spread in the early months of fall. By October, Washington wrote Madison for advice on the constitutionality of convening Congress in another city. Frost soon halted the mosquito-carried illness, and Washington avoided the difficult choice of tampering with the controversial agreement on the seat of government.

This vibrant city of Philadelphia played an important role in the often rancorous debates that characterized Congress in the 1790s. The well-established press in the city served as an influential voice of the emerging Federalist and Republican parties. The vicious, often personal, attacks in the Philadelphia papers were an essential part of the political divisions that participants in Congress considered a struggle over the very fate of the young republic. The activity of the city's press heightened interest in the new government and forced the Congress and president to recognize the strength of public opinion.

Within Congress Hall, the greatest debates of the 1790s concerned foreign policy and the reputed advantages of alliance with either Great Britain or France. The issues of neutrality, discriminatory tariffs, commercial treaties and military preparedness were all raised by Congress to a level of questions about national development. Most Congressmen, whether pro-British or pro-French, commercially-minded or agrarian, believed the United States' response to war in Europe would set the future of the republic. The ensuing debates were as divisive as any Congress has seen outside the years immediately preceding the Civil War.

The depth of political conviction in the House of Representatives burst into a particularly demeaning violence in 1798. During a debate on President Adams' request for military appropriations, Matthew Lyon, a Republican from Vermont, insulted the character of the Federalist delegation from Connecticut. Roger Griswold

responded with taunts about Lyon's court martial during the Revolutionary War. Words evidently failed Lyon, who spit a mouthful of tobacco juice in the face of the Connecticut congressman. When the House failed to pass the recommendation of the Committee of Privileges to expel Lyon, Griswold approached Lyon at his desk in the House chamber and began beating him with a cane. Lyon reached for nearby fireplace tongs, and the two fell to the floor wrestling. After Members separated Lyon and Griswold, John Davis of Kentucky moved to expel them both, but the House refused on both counts.

For the House of Representatives, the debates in Philadelphia held a special importance in terms of establishing prerogatives in its relations with the Senate and the executive branch. The Constitution granted the House no special role in the conduct of foreign affairs, but that body used its control of the appropriations process to exert its influence over the implementation of treaties.

Congress left Philadelphia for its permanent seat on the Potomac just months before the House of Representatives selected Thomas Jefferson as the third President. The election of Jefferson and a republican majority in Congress gained acceptance for the political opposition and ended the worst debates of the 1790s. While the political process became more orderly, the new capital provided none of the diversions or amenities available in Philadelphia. Contrary to the expectations of many in Philadelphia, the removal of the capital had a negligible effect on the commercial growth of the city. Congress Hall became home to a succession of federal, state, and local courts through the nineteenth century. Today the House and Senate chambers in Congress Hall have been restored to their appearance in the 1790s and are open to the public.

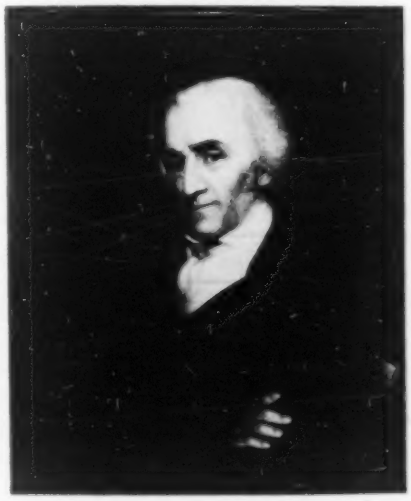
From Constitutional Convention to the House of Representatives: Part 3

At the signing of the Federal Constitution on September 17, 1787, only three of the delegates who remained in attendance at the convention refused to place their names on the new charter of government. George Mason and Edmund Randolph of Virginia and Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts had attended throughout the summer and originally supported a stronger form of central government. When the Committee on Style presented a final draft of the Constitution on September 13, these three delegates declared their unwillingness to sign. For Mason, the new plan of government elicited old fears of a monarchy or "tyrannical aristocracy" that would follow an excessive concentration of governmental authority. He could not sign until a second convention gathered popular opinion. Randolph, who was largely responsible for the enumeration of Congress' power, feared the authority given the legislature remained too ambiguous. He would reserve final opinion on the Federal Constitution until after the states voted on ratification. At the Virginia Convention Randolph voted for ratification and joined the Washington administration as attorney general and, later, secretary of state. As the sketch below explains, Elbridge Gerry's refusal to sign also was no bar to holding office under the new Constitution.

The careers of Hugh Williamson and Abraham Baldwin offer examples of the diverse backgrounds brought to public service in this highly politicized era. The events of the Revolution and the establishment of an independent national government encouraged the participation of men who might normally have avoided political office. Williamson and Baldwin are characteristic of the secondary figures who enhanced the level of talent present at the Federal Convention and in the early Congresses.

ELBRIDGE GERRY (1744-1814)

The life of Elbridge Gerry was as rich in experience as it was in inconsistencies. Following a successful career in maritime trade, Gerry spent forty years in public service. From the movement for Independence through the War of 1812, Gerry repeatedly held political office on the state and national levels. His dedication to the new nation was apparent even to those confused by the frequent reversals in his political stance. A leading supporter of a powerful central government when he arrived at the Federal Convention in 1787, Gerry finally refused to sign the Constitution and led the Antifederalist forces in Massachusetts before he declared his support for the new government and won election to the First Congress. Gerry's unpredictable political behavior was in part the result of an obvious eccentricity of character. More significant was a lifelong inability to reconcile his rigid political ideals with the rapidly changing demands of public life and private opportunities in the new nation. Like many Americans in the late-eighteenth century, Gerry was caught between a traditional distrust of concentrated political power and the desire to promote national development through an energetic government.



Independence National Historical Park Collection.

ELBRIDGE GERRY

Gerry was born, July 17, 1744, to a world of privilege and opportunity in Marblehead, Massachusetts. His father had emigrated from England, married the daughter of a Boston merchant, and established his own successful business in Marblehead. In 1762 Gerry became the first in his family to graduate from Harvard College. He returned to Marblehead and joined his family in their trade with the West Indies. From the time of Gerry's election to the Massachusetts General Court in 1772, his political

career took precedence over his lucrative trading activities.

In the Massachusetts legislature Gerry quickly became a protege of Samuel Adams and embraced the patriots' cause. In 1774 Gerry served in the Provincial Congress and on the local committees that supplanted royal authority in the colony. In 1776 Gerry became a delegate to the Continental Congress where he was one of the most active members during the four years following Independence. A signer of the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation, Gerry busied himself with every type of business in the Congress. His mercantile background prepared him for an influential role on the Treasury Board that supervised continental finances. At the same time he remained a partner with his brothers in the rewarding business of provisioning the Revolutionary Army.

In 1780 Gerry left the Continental Congress and served again in the Massachusetts legislature. By the time he returned to Congress in 1783 he was convinced the United States needed a stronger national government. Gerry's business interests and service on the Treasury Board of Congress made him particularly aware of the need for greater authority over commercial and financial matters. He was less certain, however, about the proper means of granting such authority to the national government. He rejected Massachusetts' proposal for a convention to consider revisions in the Articles of Confederation and refused to take his seat at the Annapolis Convention because of its limited authority.

Gerry agreed to join the Massachusetts delegation at the Federal Convention in Philadelphia in 1787. Despite his intention to establish a more effective national government, Gerry became a vociferous, and often tiresome, opponent of every proposal he perceived to be an unnecessary concentration of power. He challenged representation based on property as the opening wedge of an aristocratic faction. He was equally opposed to the popular election of House Members as a dangerous measure of unchecked democracy. He also argued for a larger House of Reprsentatives in order to dilute the influence of individual Members. The other delegates regarded Gerry more as a nuisance than a contributing participant in the Convention. One delegate claimed Gerry opposed every measure of which he was not the author. More serious were the charges that Gerry was motivated by personal interest. A strong advocate of full repayment of all debts owed by the national and state governments, Gerry held more public securities than any other delegate.

When the delegates came to sign the Constitution on September 17, Gerry offered a detailed list of reasons for withholding his name. Many of his objections concerned minor points of administration or what he considered disadvantages for Massachusetts. Gerry admitted that he might have approved the Constitution had it not granted Congress the authority to raise armies and revenue without limit or the power to enact laws it considered "necessary and proper."

Gerry continued his opposition to the new Constitution during the campaign for ratification in Massachusetts. Although not a delegate to the state convention in Boston, Gerry appeared at the request of antifederalist delegates and answered questions on the proceedings in Philadelphia. As had so often been the case, however, Gerry's views were not fixed in stone. During the election for Congress following ratification of the Constitution, he declared it the duty of all Americans to support the new system of government. He subsequently won election to the House of Representatives in the First and Second Congresses.

Gerry's congressional career was as unpredictable as his earlier political service. He opposed the creation of a single secretary of the treasury but became a supporter of Hamilton's aggressive fiscal policy. In the ratification convention he decried the lack of a bill of rights, but in Congress he suggested a delay in passage of the amendments. At the Federal Convention he feared Congress' power to set its own salaries and then criticized the approved salary of six dollars a day as proof that only "nabobs or indigent men" would run for Congress.

In 1797 President John Adams called Gerry out of retirement to serve on a special mission to France. In Paris, Gerry and his colleagues John Marshall and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney were confronted with a demand for bribes from the infamous "X, Y, Z" agents. Marshall and Pinckney left, but Gerry remained in the hopes of averting war with France. His informal discussions with Talleyrand made no concessions but won him the enmity of Federalists in America. Upon his return to Massachusetts Gerry joined with the Jeffersonian Republicans. Gerry was elected a Republican governor of the state in 1810 after four unsuccessful nominations. Two years later, during his second administration, Gerry gained passage of a redistricting bill that added his name to American political vocabulary. One eastern district was so oddly shaped in order to dilute Federalist votes that a Federalist, noting the salamander-like outline on a map, dubbed it a gerrymander.

As the leading Republican in New England, Gerry was a logical choice for James Madison's running mate in 1812. Gerry was inaugurated as Vice President on March 4, 1813 and served until his death in Washington on November 23, 1814.

HUGH WILLIAMSON 1735-1819

In another era, a man with the wide-ranging and absorbing interests of Hugh Williamson might never have entered political life. During the convulsive events of the American Revolution, however, Williamson's varied career and extensive travels inevitably drew him into public affairs. For twenty years in the midst of his long life, Williamson participated in a series of events involved in the establishment of an independent nation. Although he held political office for only ten years, he played an active role in the drafting and ratification of the Constitution and served in the first two Congresses.

Williamson spent the first forty years of his life far from the world of politics. He was born in West Nottingham, Pennsylvania on December

5, 1735. He attended local academies and in 1757 was a member of the first graduating class at the College of Philadelphia (later the University of Pennsylvania). After studying for the ministry in Pennsylvania and Connecticut, Williamson returned to the College of Philadelphia to study medicine rather than preach. Williamson continued medical studies in Edinburgh, London and Utrect, but upon return to Philadelphia he found practice less attractive than study. After experiencing fevers whenever in the presence of seriously ill patients, Williamson decided to try a career in business. His real passion remained scientific study. Under the auspices of the prestigious American Philosophical Society he served on a commission to study the transits of Venus and Mercury and published a report of comet observations.

Williamson's first involvement in the events of the American Revolution came about by accident. In December 1773 Williamson set sail for Europe on a mission to raise money for an academy in Delaware. While waiting for his ship in Boston he was witness to the Boston Tea Party. Upon his arrival in London, Williamson found himself one of the first to report the news from Massachusetts, and he appeared as a witness before the Privy Council. Williamson's membership in the American Philosophical Society brought him an introduction to Benjamin Franklin who was living in London and welcomed Williamson's help in electrical experiments. Franklin also convinced this recent arrival to gain access to an office where he could obtain letters that passed between Massachusetts' Governor Thomas Hutchinson and Lieutenant Governor Peter Oliver. The letters recovered by Williamson offered proof of Hutchinson's intent to deprive Massachusetts of established political rights.

Upon learning of the Declaration of Independence, Williamson returned to America and established himself as a merchant in Edenton, North Carolina. The interruption of trade with Great Britain provided lucrative opportunities for commerce with the French West Indies. In addition to his business success, Williamson found in North Carolina his first opportunity for political office. He entered the state House of Commons in 1782, and during the first session the Assembly elected him to be a delegate to the Continental Congress. His experience in Congress and the difficulties of carrying on an international trade under the Articles of Confederation convinced Williamson of the need to strengthen the national government.

Independence National Historical Park Collection

HUGH WILLIAMSON 1735-1819

With his interest in trade, Williamson was particularly keen to take his seat at the Annapolis Convention in September 1786, but he arrived at the Maryland capital on the day of adjournment. Williamson had a better opportunity to discuss a revision of the Articles of Confederation when he attended the Federal Convention in 1787. He became the leader of the North Carolina delegation and was an important figure on some of the Convention's committees. Williamson proposed the regular census for determining the apportionment of House seats, but other ideas, such as a plural executive and election of the executive by the Congress, failed to gain support. Although not a native of North Carolina, Williamson understood well the necessity of making concessions to slaveholders if the southern states were to support the Constitution. He approved of the compromise granting representation for three-fifths of the slave population and he opposed proposals to restrict the slave trade. As a member of the Committee on the Slave Trade and Navigation Acts he showed further concern for southern interests in his proposal to require approval from two-thirds of the Congress for the enactment of any navigation act.

Williamson did not attend the Hillsboro Convention that refused to ratify the Constitution for North Carolina but was a delegate at Fayetteville when the second state convention ratified in November 1789. He then won election to the First Congress and presented his credentials at Federal Hall in New York City on March 19, 1790. Williamson arrived in the House of Representatives in the midst of the debate over Alexander Hamilton's proposal for the federal government's assumption of state debts incurred during the Revolution. As did most congressmen from the South, Williamson opposed assumption. In general, Williamson favored federal encouragement of commerce, but he opposed special bounties for regionally-produced goods. During his two terms in Congress Williamson voted with his fellow delegates from North Carolina and the South. One exception was his support for an excise tax on whiskey. Williamson hoped the federal levy would reduce consumption of alcohol.

While living in New York City during the First Congress, Williamson, at age 54, married for the first time. He declined renomination to the Third Congress and moved from North Carolina to his wife's home in New York City. He spent the rest of his life in New York involved in literary and historical projects. He continued his scientific interests by serving on the city commission that investigated the yellow fever epidemic in 1805. Williamson died in New York City on May 22, 1819.

Library of Congress.

ABRAHAM BALDWIN 1754-1807

As a native of Connecticut and a Yale-educated minister, Abraham Baldwin was an unlikely figure to be a steady representative of Georgia for over twenty years in the early life of the nation. Baldwin's political career began soon after he moved to Georgia in the 1780s and carried him to the national stage as a participant in the key events in the formation of the republic. From the Continental Congress through the Federal Convention and in the House of Representatives and Senate, Baldwin offered an important measure of continuity for his adopted state and the young nation.

Baldwin was born in North Guilford, Connecticut on November 22, 1754. His father was a blacksmith intent on offering his children the finest education available. Abraham Baldwin graduated from Yale College in 1772, and his father moved the rest of the family to New Haven in 1775 in order to provide them with a better education. Following a path familiar to Yale graduates at the time, Baldwin became a licensed minister in 1775 and was a tutor in New Haven. In 1779 he served as a chaplain in the Revolutionary Army. The president of Yale College, Ezra Stiles, reported Baldwin was an excellent preacher, and in 1781 Yale offered Baldwin a position as professor of divinity. Baldwin, however, left the ministry and by 1783 was admitted to the bar in Connecticut.

Just months after entering the law, Baldwin set out for Georgia carrying letters of introduction from Ezra Stiles. He was admitted to the Georgia bar in January 1784, and one month later served on a panel appointed by the governor to organize a college. When Baldwin entered the Georgia General Assembly in 1785 he wrote and won approval for a charter establishing a state system of education. Baldwin served as titular president of the proposed state college until its actual founding as Franklin College in 1789.

Baldwin sufficiently impressed his colleagues in the Assembly to win selection as a delegate to the Continental Congress in 1785 and again in 1787. Georgia also chose Baldwin to be among its three-man delegation at the Constitutional Convention in 1787. Though not a regular contributor to the debates that summer, Baldwin was the leading spokesman for the Georgia delegation and attended faithfully from the time he arrived in Philadelphia in June. As a New Englander living in the south, he proved a useful agent for compromise, particularly in committee work. Baldwin, like Hugh Williamson, fully supported the native southerners in their demand that the new government have no authority to interfere with the institution of slavery.

As a Member of the House of Representatives in the First through Fifth Congresses, Baldwin continued to vote with southerners. He actively opposed the acceptance by Congress of a Quaker anti-slavery petition and reminded his colleagues that Congress' only control over slavery was its power to levy duties on imported slaves. In the initial debate on Hamilton's plans for funding the debt, Baldwin did not share the Virginian's apprehensions about federal assumption of state war debts. By 1792, Baldwin had come to see Hamilton's system as a threat to the balance between the national and state governments. The following year he joined James Madison in voting for William Branch Giles' resolution to censure Alexander Hamilton. In the partisan debates that accompanied congressional consideration of the Jay Treaty in 1795 and 1796, Baldwin was aligned with the Republican opposition.

In many ways, Baldwin remained a peculiar character to represent Georgia. He was never a planter and avoided the land speculation that was a preoccupation for so many Georgians. Although a lawyer, he practiced little in this state where the legal profession was second only to planting in importance and prestige. In fact, Baldwin's repeated service on the national level removed him from Georgia and its partisan local politics. Baldwin's distance from other Georgians was evident in his response to Senator James Gunn's challenge to a duel following a dispute over letters from some of Baldwin's constituents. Rather than answer the challenge, Baldwin asked the House of Representatives to investigate the Georgia Senator's actions as a possible interference in the relationship between a House Member and his constituents. The Committee of Privilege agreed that Baldwin's privileges had been violated but accepted Gunn's letter of apology to the Speaker of the House.

Baldwin's reliance on technical procedures was characteristic of this man who preferred to avoid personal or factional confrontations. He was especially uncomfortable with the political divisions that separated him from old friends in New England during the Adams presidency. Baldwin moved to the Senate in 1799 and served as president pro tempore of that body in the Seventh Congress. He remained in Washington as a Senator until his death on March 4, 1807, one day after the adjournment of the Ninth Congress.

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